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Old Street Tool, Inc.

formerly Clark & Williams

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About Our Planes

Why 18th Century Style Planes?

It takes little more than casual examination of traditional planes for the high quality of early planes to become apparent. For the most part, 18th Century planes are of higher quality than the later 19th and 20th Century planes. There is one main reason for the quality difference--it takes more labor to produce the refinements of the earlier planes.

At Old Street Tool we struggle with the same issues earlier plane makers faced. The major issue being that labor is the primary resource involved in making traditional wooden planes. Before going further, let's compare early molding planes with their later counterparts. As you view this photo keep in mind that Robert Wooding is accepted as the first full-time professional British plane maker and Auburn Tool Company was one of the major 19th Century plane makers in the US.

Pictured are (from left to right) a ROBERT WOODING (1706-39) ogee, a CASEY & CO (1857) ogee, and an AUBURN TOOL CO (1864-93) side bead.

By the mid 18th Century, British wooden planes represented the best of a fully mature technology. The last real improvement known as boxing-the addition of dense wood, generally boxwood, wear strips for fine details was in common use before 1750.The well defined chamfers, shoulder treatment and skillfully executed features of the early 18th Century WOODING plane are apparent at a glance. One will also quickly notice the truncated grip area that makes up the top portion of the plane body on the two later planes. These are just the most apparent of the compromises made to reduce labor costs as time went by.

From the early 1800's development efforts appear to be aimed at reducing labor costs and those reductions translated to a steady decline in the quality of wooden planes. American plane makers seem to have led the way in the effort save labor but British planes also suffered from the effects of cost cutting. The ultimate expression of this cost cutting probably was the use of prison labor by some US plane makers. Some of the changes include standardizing wedge thickness to two or three sizes, a less comfortable shortened grip, ill advised introduction of early machine production, reducing efforts at chamfering and shoulder details. Each of these has cascading results that impair the function, feel and quality of the planes.

When one becomes accustomed to 18th Century planes the later planes appear as if the plane maker never completed his job. Later planes look and feel unnecessarily bulky and clumsy-they lack the agile feel and performance of early planes.

Old Street Tool planes are of the style and performance of the 18th Century British planes, which we feel were the pinnacle of the art of wooden plane making. We haven't chosen the features of any particular plane maker. Instead we've selected those 18th Century features we feel are the most representative and most refined.. Because these features can look very different on planes of different sizes, we've fine tuned the proportions and presentation of these elements so that planes of all sizes look related to each other-like they're part of a set. It has taken years of refinement to get where we are today and we'll likely continue to make subtle changes.

A matched pair of Old Street Tool snipes bill planes.

The lack of commercial production of metal parts for wooden planes and lack of commercial quantities of thick beech lumber pose additional problems for contemporary plane makers. At Old Street Tool we custom machine the critical metal parts in-house. We work with custom sawyers in prime beech areas to maintain a stock of quality beech plane stock and dry it ourselves.

It was predominantly American wooden plane makers who prematurely switched to depending on machine production. Their early machines, tooling and fixtures lacked the ability, repeatable accuracy and capacity needed for quality plane production. Designs and tolerances were modified to accommodate the introduction of these machines and quality again suffered in the effort to reduce labor costs. We have been far more cautious in the introduction of machines. For years we made planes by hand to familiarize ourselves with the processes and tolerances needed to match the quality of the early planes. Many of the machines we now use have been modified, much of the tooling and the all fixtures have been custom made for our needs. Even with our machine capability, the critical work is done by hand with traditional plane making tools.

The trade of plane making sprang from the woodworking trades. One of the factors which greatly influenced the high quality of early planes was the close relationship between woodworkers and plane makers. Combined, we have more than 65 years of professional woodworking experience, we keenly feel those same connections. While Old Street Tool planes are in museum and other collections our past and future tools were and will be produced with the intent of being used at a craftsmen's bench. We're grateful for the knowledge generated by the tool collecting community but we'll leave the production of planes intended solely as shelf jewelry to others. We feel the greatest value of these planes lies in enabling those who spend time at a workbench to rediscover the efficiencies of traditional trade practices.

We're confident we produce planes equal to the deceptively simple and highly evolved British planes of the mid 18th Century. It's been nearly two centuries since wooden planes approaching this quality were available to woodworkers. At Old Street Tool we're proud of the results of our efforts.

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